TAAZ AVINE

McCoy had encountered the drugs and illusions of a hundred worlds, but none could account for this abrupt awakening. Sight, scent and sound crashed upon him like walls falling and when he blinked the confusion away, he knew the place--Sabek Umnor, the forbidden city where Romulan warriors took their pleasure from the spoils of war. He had been here before when they had exchanged prisoners and he would never forget the smell--spice, sex, misery--or the half-human remnants the Federation prisoners had become. It smelled the same now as the noise and blazing heat of day yielded to the sudden chill of desert night.

His wrist pained him and he was no longer floating observer, but centered in his vulnerable human body. A barbed wristlet and leather thong bound him to the belt of a tall warrior clad in the leather-on-leather of a Romulan mercenary. He himself wore the black robe, hood and veil of a slave.

Frantic, he reached for memories that could explain his presence here and found nothing. He had been safe on the Enterprise, worried about Spock's return to the sector of space where Jim had been lost. He had been alone, and then...then.... The memory eluded him. Someone speaking...softly, pursuasively, a velvet voice leading him.... He couldn't remember. The effort to do so caused him to fall out of step with the man who led him.

With the logic of madness, of dreams, the Romulan turned.

"Spock!" Sudden pain in his wrist turned it into a gasp.

"Slaves do not speak without permission, Doctor. Given permission, they speak Romulan."

"But I--" Again the wrench on his wrist, worse this time, enough to bring him to his knees. He couldn't believe the pain, the trickle of blood snaking down the back of his hand, couldn't believe Spock was--what? Traitor? Madman? He didn't dare ask. It had to be a dream.

He knelt on the warm stones and fought for some anchorhold of sanity.

"Submission is--a slave's virtue," Spock said. "I have--researched the topic--intensively."

Appalled, McCoy heard the faint hesitation in the speech that would have amounted to a stutter in anyone else. Dead giveaway for a personality coming apart at the seams. Spock's eyes were as lightless as a dead man's. McCoy had to look away.

He could feel that he was naked under his robe--no communicator, no weapon. One glance showed him that there would be no help here. Romulans were everywhere. They were in a courtyard opening off a busy street. Spock, like the others, was watching an ornate gate. McCoy couldn't read the script over the door, but the entwined male bodies sculpted in the center panel were explicit enough.

Oh, God. Nothing had gone right for months. He should have downgraded the Vulcan long ago, even without any more to go on than his own gut feeling. He'd known something more was wrong than grief over Jim's death. But that damned Vulcan ability to function was hard to challenge. Now the worst had happened and it was his responsibility to salvage what he could--mute, unarmed, among enemies.

By full dark twenty odd people had gathered in the courtyard, afoot or in covered chairs. When the gate opened they crowded forward and Spock joined them. Fully aware now, McCoy made no protest, taking his cue from other slaves present--eyes down, silent, alert to their master's every movement. Spock surrendered his weapons and a golden token to a gatekeeper. As they followed the others, McCoy heard snatches of gossip and realized that with the help of language tapes absorbed long ago he could at least understand what was said; even if it had been permitted he could not speak, he had never mastered clicked sibilants and double consonants of the language. The Romulans around him spoke of a golden slave, of delights unequaled.

He supposed the place was splendid, in a barbaric way, but the granite bones were too close under the soft carpets, the outside air was filtered through too many bars and grills. They turned and twisted through a maze of parting curtains and sudden stairways until he lost all sense of direction, and Spock's tranced look gave him no assurance that the Vulcan would remember their return path--if he even intended to return. He looked like a man going to his execution. Let it be a dream.

Their journey ended in a soft room with a stage, an intimate auditorium where slim, nude Vulcanoid youths ushered the guests to broad couches, offering food, wine, and small alabaster pots with pierced covers from which a sweet smoke curled. McCoy watched the other slaves and knelt beside Spock's couch, careful not to obstruct his view. All the room was green and black, rich with ornate hangings or spangled with mirrors. McCoy saw himself in the glass, only another slave kneeling in the gloom. Most of the room's light came from a lantern of thin jade plates, centered low over the bed on the stage, an outsize bed with four solid posts and a mirror behind it. A slow, sensuous throb of drums and bells filled the air.

The Vulcan shifted on the couch and McCoy, thinking he was going to speak, glanced up and saw that Spock, too, was nude under his tunic. Shocked, he looked away, as embarrassed as a small boy caught comparing himself to adults. But the image stayed in his mind--the parted thighs, thickly curling hair, balls almost engulfed in the thicket, one-eyed snake staring at him. Not a dream. Nightmare.

He forced himself to look at the others, taking the chance that someone would comment on his blue eyes, or worse, that he would see someone who could recognize Spock. These were clearly no country bumpkins, but Romulan elite. A bonded pair of young warriors lounged together on one couch, a grizzled elder was being deftly served by his own young attendants, and a cloaked figure waited with feline impatience that suggested the feminine to McCoy. They were like hunting cats in uneasy alliance around a kill. There was none of the bonhomie of a human joyhouse. They kept to themselves, fondling their favorites, but there was a shared excitement in the air as real as the music of the drums.

He knew what they were going to see. The iron rings set in the posts of the bed brought on a